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Author(s): Muhammad Suleman

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Institutionalisation of Sufi Islam after 9/11 and the Rise of Barelvi Extremism in Pakistan

Muhammad Suleman

Extremism and terrorism in Pakistan have disrupted its social values and hampered its economic growth and tolerant religious ethos. To overcome these threats, then President General Pervez Musharraf promoted Sufi Islam in Pakistan as an antidote due to its flexible, tolerant and pluralistic nature. However, followers of Sufi Islam started growing violent over the issue of blasphemy law in 2010. This paper covers the period when Sufi Islam in Pakistan was considered essential to counter violent-extremism and examines the causes of growing radicalisation among its clerics and followers.

Introduction

Pakistan has been facing the twin threats of extremism and terrorism over the last three to four decades, disrupting the country's economic growth and damaging its social fabric. In the 1980s, Pakistan, the United States (US) and Saudi Arabia supported the Afghan *Mujahideen* to battle forces of the former Soviet Union in the country. Muslim fighters from across the Muslim world gathered in Afghanistan to join the fight. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988-89, the US withdrew from Afghanistan without satisfactorily terminating the conflict and installing a stable post-Soviet political order. Nonetheless, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and some other Arab countries maintained contacts with the Afghan *mujahideen* groups, where a few of them turned towards global jihadism, threatening regional and global peace.

After joining forces with the US against terrorism, General Musharraf took several measures to counter extremism in Pakistan, including the institutionalisation of Sufi Islam, which is followed by the Barelvi school of thought. Barelvis are considered to be more inclusive and pluralistic than other Muslim

sects in Pakistan. Sufi Islam was promoted to counter the influence of Wahhabi and Deobandi schools of thought, which some suspect sowed the seeds of extremism in Pakistani society.

The Barelvi-Deobandi Divide

Although exact figures of sectarian demographics in Pakistan are unavailable, it is estimated that the Barelvis are considered as the majority, constituting more than 50 percent of the country's total population. The remaining 50 percent include Deobandis (25 percent), Shias (15-20 percent) and the Ahle-Hadith (5 percent).¹ Both Deobandis and Barelvis belong to Fiqqah-e-Hanfia (the Hanafist school of thought). However, the ideological split between both schools started during the British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent.

The Deobandi school of thought is named after the famous Madarssah 'Dar-ul-Aloom Deoband,' which was established in India in 1861 in the town of Deoband to promote 'authentic' values of Islam. The Deobandis started to work towards the purification of Islam in the Indian subcontinent by excluding local values, which they consider to have diluted Islam. They criticised the indigenous shrine culture, the *piri-muridi* (saint-follower bond) system and termed it *bida'at* (impurity and unlawful addition to Islam). In response, the Barelvi school of thought emerged under the Sufi cleric Ahmad Raza Khan Barelvi (1856-1921).

¹ Martina Schrott, "Muslim Sects", in *Pakistan: Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. Wolf Gang, Mathias Vogl and Peter Webinger, (Vienna: Austrian Federal Ministry of Interior, 2014), 138
[http://www.bfa.gv.at/files/broschueren/Buch%20komplett%20\(Onlineversion\)%206,23MB.pdf](http://www.bfa.gv.at/files/broschueren/Buch%20komplett%20(Onlineversion)%206,23MB.pdf)

Historically in Pakistan, both the Barelvi and Deobandi sects have countered each other's ideological outlooks, worldviews and influence. More recently, their disagreements have degenerated into violent clashes for control of mosques, particularly in Karachi, as well as to increase their social and political influence. Barelvis claim they should have a greater share in the country's power structure, as they are the majority.² However, the Barelvis are internally divided, as various Barelvi party factions differ with each other over ideological and political issues.³

Assimilation of Sufism into Pakistan's national framework

The Musharraf regime promoted Sufi Islam as a counterweight to extremism, with various political leaders as well as state officials issuing statements to propagate Sufism as the 'real face of Islam.' The government started patronising Sufism and empowered *pirs* (saints) and Barelvi clerics to ensure internal stability. At the same time, the Deobandi and Wahhabi interpretations of Islam were disparaged and described as rigged, Middle Eastern and ruinous to society.

In 2004, Musharraf announced his doctrine of "enlightened moderation" which stresses on the renunciation of violence and promotion of Islam's peaceful message enshrined in Sufism.⁴ Inspired by poet-philosopher Dr. Muhammad Iqbal's grandson Yousaf Salahudin, Musharraf established the National Council for the Promotion of Sufism (NCPS) in 2006. Its main objective was to promote Sufi philosophy and culture, especially Sufi's common values of tolerance and pluralism. In the same year, Musharraf inaugurated the National Council for Promoting Sufism on the birthday of Muhammad Iqbal at Lahore.

² Saqib Akbar, *Pakistan kay Deeni Masalik* (Pakistan's Muslim Creeds), 128.

³ Currently, the major Barelvi groups in Pakistan are: Sunni Tehreek (ST), Dawat-e-Islami (DI), Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT), Minahaj-ul-Quran, Ahle-e-Sunnat-wal-Jamat (Barelvi group), Jamiat-e-Ulemai Pakistan (JUP), Tehreek Labaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLYR), and Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) etcetra.

⁴ Pervez Musharraf, "A Plea for Enlightened Moderation", *Washington Post*, June 1, 2004, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A5081-2004May31.html> (accessed May 11, 2017).

To disseminate Sufism, the government focused on both the social and political front. At the social front, Sufi ideology was promoted through celebrations of *urs* (death commemorations of Sufi saints), promotion of spiritual poetry and Sufi music shows. At the political front, the pro-Sufi religious parties were brought into the political mainstream. These parties arranged processions throughout the country and openly condemned the Taliban and various other sectarian militant outfits in Pakistan.

During this period, Musharraf regularly visited Sufi shrines in Punjab and Sindh provinces terming them as the lands of Sufis. In addition, various government institutions including Pakistan Academy of Letters, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, and Pakistan National Council of the Arts, organised seminars, conferences, workshops, literature festivals, and music and arts exhibitions to assist in spreading Sufism and the promotion of cultural values.⁵ The National Council for Promotion of Sufism stopped functioning after Musharraf resigned in 2008.

Role of Pakistan People's Party (PPP)

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) which came into power in 2008 then continued the policy of promoting Sufism in Pakistan. The PPP government established the Sufi council with a new name 'Sufi Advisory Council' in 2009. The Council consisted of seven members, and it was dominated by the Barelvi political party Jamiat-e-Ulemai Pakistan (JUP).⁶ It is worth pointing out that during the PPP rule (2008-2013), then Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and Minister for Religious Affairs Hamdi Saeed Kazmi were custodians of various Sufi shrines in Pakistan. They were very vocal

⁵ Alix Philippon, "A Sublime, Yet Disputed, Object Of Political Ideology? Sufism In Pakistan At The Crossroads" *State And Nation-Building in Pakistan: Beyond Islam and Security*, ed. Roger D. Long, Gurharpal Singh, Yunas Samad and Ian Talbot, (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁶ Ahmad Hassan, "Sufi Advisory Council set up to fight extremism," *Dawn*, June 8, 2009, <https://www.dawn.com/news/469894/sufi-advisory-council-set-up-to-fight-extremism> (accessed May 1, 2017).

against the Taliban despite numerous threats to their lives.

Besides promoting Sufism, the PPP government also strengthened two Barelvi political parties, Sunni Tehreek (ST) and Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) to counter extremist narratives in the country. In May 2009, then Foreign Minister Qureshi and shrine-custodian of the revered Sufi Saint Shah Rukn-e-Alim, while addressing the annual *urs* (death anniversary) ceremony said, “Sunni Tehreek has decided to play an active role in the fight against Talibanisation...We will not surrender to the forces that harm the interests of the country and distort the image of Islam... people of the country loved Islam but their Islam was totally different from the brand that troublemakers tried to impose at gunpoint.”⁷

Notwithstanding the potential of Sufi Islam to curb radicalism of various Deobandi and Wahhabi jihadist and political groups in Pakistan, its wholesale promotion raised concerns. Some experts warned against granting greater authority to pro-Sufi groups that may negatively impact society. For instance, Pakistani scholar Ayesha Siddiqi cautioned that “greater power not only enhanced the greed for more power but also resulted in corrupting of the Sufi order.”⁸ Others viewed the promotion of Sufism as “not a piece of good news”, describing it as yet another episode of politicising the religion that has already created many problems for the country.⁹

Symptoms of Extremism

The Barelvis have a history being involved in violent activities. During the 1990s, many Barelvi factions participated in the so-called Kashmir Jihad. Among the prominent organisations involved were the Sunni Jihad Council, Tehreek-e-Jihad Jammu Kashmir, Harkate Inqilab-e-Islami, Ababil Mujahideen,

Lashkar-e-Mustafa and Lashkar-e-Islam¹⁰. Following the ban on militant organisations by General Musharraf in 2002, the Barelvi militants returned from Kashmir and many of them joined Sunni Tehreek.

However, the dramatic shift towards extremism erupted in 2010 when the former Punjab Governor Salman Taseer supported a Christian woman, Asia Bibi, who was sentenced to death for the alleged blasphemy of Prophet Muhammad. In a TV interview, Taseer termed Article 295C of Pakistan’s Penal Code (PPC), the blasphemy law, as draconian and that many people exploited it to settle personal enmities. Following this, several Barelvi clerics issued *fatwas* (religious decree) against Taseer, arguing that he had committed blasphemy by criticising the blasphemy law and declared him *wajib-ul-qatal* (worthy of death).¹¹ The fallout of these *fatwas* was detrimental; Taseer was killed by his own bodyguard Mumtaz Qadri, a Punjab Police personnel in 2011. Qadri was also a follower of the Karachi based non-political Barelvi religious organisation Dawat-e-Islami, which is typically considered as a peaceful organisation. Later in the court, Mumtaz Qadri said that he is not linked to any extremist organisation. However, he admitted that he was “impressed” by the speeches of two Barelvi clerics, Mufti Qari Haneef Qureshi and Imtiaz Shah.¹²

The arrest of Mumtaz Qadri angered Barelvi religious parties, which started to stage rallies and processions in his support and against any expected amendments to the blasphemy law. Upon his execution in the Rawalpindi jail following the Supreme Court’s decision in 2016, there was an outpouring of public sympathy while different Barelvi groups iconized him as a hero and martyr.

⁷ “Anti-Terror Consensus Shaping Up: Qureshi,” *Dawn*, May 4, 2009, <https://www.dawn.com/news/856494> (accessed May 01, 2017).

⁸ Ayesha Siddiqi, “Faith Wars”, *Dawn*, February 14, 2009, <https://www.dawn.com/news/833136> (accessed May 2, 2017).

⁹ Ali Eteraz, “State-Sponsored Sufism”, *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2009, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/06/10/state-sponsored-sufism/>, (accessed May 2, 2017).

¹⁰ Mubashir Akram, “The Emerging Barelvi Extremism”, *Daily Times*, July 31, 2017, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/123139/the-emerging-barelvi-extremism/> (accessed January 29, 2018).

¹¹ Salman Siddiqui, “Hardline Stance: Religious bloc condones murder,” *Express Tribune*, January 5, 2011, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/99313/hardline-stance-religious-bloc-condones-murder/> (accessed May 3, 2017).

¹² “Sermons Motivated Killer Of Governor Taseer,” *Dawn*, January 10, 2011, <https://www.dawn.com/news/597628/sermons-motivated-killer-of-governor-taseer> (accessed May 3, 2017).

After Qadri's execution, many Barelvi outfits emerged on Pakistan's political landscape. The groups include Tehreek Labaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLYR), a coalition of Sunni Tehreek, Fidayeen-i-Khatam-i-Nabuwat, Aalmi Tanzeem-e-Ahl-e-Sunat and Pakistan Ahle Sunnah wal Jamaat. Since then, TLYR has successfully held processions and rallies in different cities of the country opposing amendments to Article 295-C of the PPC, and demanded the death sentence for blasphemy convicts. The main slogan of TLYR is: "*Gustakh-e-Rasool ki aik saza, sar tan say juda*" (There is only one punishment for a blasphemer: beheading).

This development has left a deep impact on society by radicalising people on the issue of blasphemy. Under the garb of blasphemy, it had resulted in a dramatic rise in human rights abuses in 2016 and 2017. For instance, one of the disciples of TLYR's founder Maulvi Khadim Hussian Rizvi, Tanveer Qadri killed a member of the Ahmadiyya community over alleged blasphemy charges in Glasgow. Later, he released his audio messages where he admitted Rizvi as his mentor and the audio messages are played at TLYR processions regularly.¹³

In March 2016, Junaid Jamshed, the pop singer turned Deobandi cleric, was beaten by a Barelvi mob at the Islamabad International Airport over alleged blasphemy charges notwithstanding his public apology and plea for forgiveness. When he died in a plane crash in December 2016, the TLYR social media pages abused him posthumously, and attributed the accident to God punishing the blasphemer. TLYR members also warned and threatened Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Imran Khan for using inappropriate words about the Prophet due to a slip of the tongue.¹⁴ Imran immediately

sought forgiveness from the Barelvi clerics and visited the Dawat-e-Islami headquarter in Karachi. A fatwa of *wajib-ul-qatil* (deserving death) was also issued against Shaan Taseer, son of Salman Taseer, for supporting Asia Bibi.

The speeches by TLYR leaders that promote Barelvi extremism have resulted in a number of violent incidents where frenzied mobs have killed people under the pretext of blasphemy charges. Examples include the killing of a student of the Abdul Wali Khan University, Mashal Khan in Mardan in 2017, and the recent assassination of a college principal in Charsadda district by a student for being marked absent for participating in the TLYR sit-in. What is even more alarming is the fact that TLYR has registered itself as a political party with the Election Commission of Pakistan to participate in the 2018 general election. More worryingly, in recent by-elections, the party has ended up as a distant third, securing more votes than PPP and Jamaate Islami.

Narrative

Currently, TLYR is promoting its extremist narrative around two main issues: the blasphemy laws and the Ahmedi community. They are opposed to any potential reforms or amendments to the blasphemy laws of PPC's Sections 295 to 298, especially Section 295C. Second, they are openly targeting the Ahmedi community, which has been officially declared non-Muslim in 1974, by opposing their appointments at government posts and their religious activities.

At the Chehlum (40th day commemoration ceremony) of Mumtaz Qadri, TLYR leaders denounced the policies of the ruling PMLN and condemned former Pakistani military chief General (Retired) Raheel Sharif for not saving Qadri. The pamphlets and booklets distributed during the ceremony contained vitriolic narratives against the PMLN government and provided justification for the killing of blasphemers.

According to Barelvi clerics, blasphemers should be beheaded and that nobody has the authority to forgive a blasphemer other than the Prophet himself. Publications that provided historical examples of blasphemy incidents during the time of the Prophet were

¹³ "Asad Shah Murder: Killer Tanveer Ahmed Releases Prison Message," *BBC*, January 31, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-38815366> (accessed May 3, 2017).

¹⁴ Imran Khan Faces Blasphemy Allegations, To Be Declared "Kaafir" Unless He Publicly Apologizes: Religious Group Issues Serious Warning, *Daily Pakistan*, January 2, 2017, <https://en.dailypakistan.com.pk/headline/kufr-fatwa-to-be-issued-against-imran-khan-unless-he-publicly-apologizes-religious-group-issues-serious-warning/> (accessed May 15, 2017).

widely distributed to justify the killing of Muslim and non-Muslim blasphemers.

Followers of the Barelvi school of thought consider themselves as Aashiq-e-Rasool (true lovers of the Prophet) and are prepared to go to any extent to safeguard his teachings. During Barelvi gatherings, various religious incidents and stories of killers of blasphemers are narrated to arouse public emotions.

Conclusion

The promotion of Sufi Islam to counter rising extremism and terrorism in Pakistan has deepened the sectarian divide. Inadequate attention was paid to the inherent fault lines within the Barelvi school of thought that inclined its followers toward extremism. The politicisation of religion to counter extremism by promoting one religious group (Barelvis) over the others (Deobandis and Wahhabis) is inherently risky, and has resulted in political resentment and opposition.

Diverse societies like Pakistan need a holistic approach and more pluralistic norms based on democratic and liberal values. In this context, the constitution of the country has the capacity to provide more flexibility and resilience to a heterogeneous society like Pakistan than one that implements a specific religious ideology or promotes a particular group.

Muhammad Suleman is a Research Associate at the Centre for Pakistan and Gulf Studies (CPGS) Islamabad working on Political Islam, Violent Extremism & Terrorism, Sufi Culture of Pakistan, and Regional Relations and Connectivity. He can be reached at shahid@cpakgulf.org.